

5.15 FARMLAND

5.15.1 Background

This section discusses the impacts of the proposed action on prime and unique farmlands. Throughout the 20th century the nation's prime and unique farmlands have decreased dramatically because of urban development. In response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has attempted to identify and preserve such land for agricultural purposes. The Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) of 1981 was enacted to minimize the extent to which Federal programs contribute to unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses.¹

If a proposed Federal action involves farmland acquisition that will be converted to a non-agricultural use, it must be determined whether any of that land is protected by the FPPA. Protected farmlands under the FPPA comprise either prime farmlands (i.e., those that have the best physical and chemical characteristics for producing items such as food, feed or fiber and which have not already been targeted for urban development or water storage); or unique farmlands, determined to be of state or local importance according to the appropriate state or local agency with the concurrence of the Secretary of Agriculture. Generally the FPPA is not applicable if:²

1. The land was purchased before August 6, 1984, for the purpose of redevelopment. In other words, land is not considered prime farmland if it has been committed to urban development (i.e., commercial, industrial, or residential).
2. The acquired area does not directly or indirectly convert farmland. Indirect conversion includes using farmland in such a way as to preclude the land from being farmed, or plans to convert the land within the foreseeable future.
3. The land is not defined as prime farmland by the FPPA. That is, "...land that is the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, fiber ... without intolerable soil erosion as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture. Prime farmland includes land that possesses the above characteristics but is being used currently to produce livestock and timber. It does not include land already in or committed to urban development or water storage." Urban development is defined with a density of 30 structures in each 40-acre area.
4. The land is not unique farmland (i.e., land other than prime farmland that is used for production of specific high-value food and fiber crops, as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture). Unique farmlands must economically sustain high quality and high yields of specific crops and be managed according to acceptable farming methods.

¹ Farmland Protection Policy Act of 1981, Public Law 97-98. December 22, 1981.

² FAA Order 5050.4A, *Airport Environmental Handbook*, Federal Aviation Administration, 1985.

5. The land has not been determined by a state or local agency to be of statewide or local importance, with concurrence of the Secretary of Agriculture.

5.15.2 Methodology

The area of environmental interest has been reviewed to identify areas where agricultural uses might occur or where the soil types have been designated as prime farmland, capable of producing high yields of various crops when managed using modern farming methods. Soil types qualifying as prime farmlands are identified by the NRCS. Qualifying soil types are excluded from protected farmlands under FPPA if already in urban development. Farmland “already in” urban development or water storage includes all such land with a density of 30 structures per 40-acre area. Farmland already in urban development also includes lands identified as “urbanized area” (UA) on the Census Bureau Map, or as urban area mapped with a “tint overprint” on the USGS topographical maps or as “urban-built-up” on the USDA Important Farmland Maps.³ A Farmland Conversion Impact Rating form has been submitted for the proposed action at Gary/Chicago International Airport.

5.15.3 Existing Conditions -- 2000

Land within the project area is presently active and/or abandoned industrial and residential property, existing railroads and roadways (including a portion of Interstate 90), and the disturbed runway clear zones.⁴ There are no areas with agricultural land uses within the study area.

5.15.4 Future Conditions – 2007

The proposed action includes acquisition of lands in the immediate vicinity of the airport; however, none of these areas are used for agricultural purposes. The area to be acquired has been previously disturbed and is presently active or abandoned industrial and residential property.

5.15.5 Summary of Findings

Although the proposed action may have an impact on soils, it will be due to clean-up activities where soils may be removed due to hazardous materials, not impacts caused by converting undeveloped land to developed land. None of the soils located within the study area or the lands where the proposed action is to occur are considered or designated as prime or unique farmland as defined in the FPPA of 1981.⁵ The absence of farms and farmland in the area is the result of the terrain and urbanization present in the vicinity of the airport, as well as the zoning and land use ordinances established by the local units of government. Local development plans, in conjunction with city and

³ 7 CFR Chapter VI, Part 658 – Farmland Protection Policy Act, 658.2 Definitions. July 5, 1984.

⁴ Archaeological Resources Management Service, *Archaeological Records Review, Gary/Chicago Airport, Lake County, Indiana*, November 19, 2003.

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, letter dated August 19, 2003.

county zoning ordinance, have already committed the areas for airport and urban development. Therefore, the proposed action will not have an impact on prime and unique farmlands.

In accordance with the FPPA, a request was made to determine whether the sites for proposed developments were considered to be prime or unique farmlands. The NRCS reviewed the Farmland Conversion Impact Rating form and determined the proposed action will not cause a conversion of prime farmland. A copy of the NRCS determinations is included in **Appendix C**.

5.15.6 Mitigation

No mitigation measures are required under the provisions of the FPPA.

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